Student MENTAL HEALTH & WELLBEING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Student MENTAL HEALTH & WELLBEING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

A practical guide

Edited by
NICOLA BARDEN & RUTH CALEB

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Introduction

Ruth Caleb and
Nicola Barden

Universities have always acknowledged that the emotional and psychological wellbeing of their students is part of their remit. While the student population is a mix of full-time and part-time, undergraduate and postgraduate, young adults and mature, the majority are still school leavers, coming away from home for the first time to live and work somewhere new. For this reason tutors, counsellors and advisers have long been an integral part of student support. Students are in a time of transition, living in an unfamiliar environment, frequently separated from their established family and social networks and any existing professional support. Good mental health is vital in order for them to manage the challenges that university life presents, to progress through their studies and to achieve their full potential.

The *Student Mental Wellbeing in Higher Education: Good Practice Guide* states that good mental health not only gives students the enthusiasm to flourish in their degree and personal life but also 'encompasses the emotional resilience to enable us to enjoy life and survive pain, disappointment and sadness, and an underlying belief in our own and others' dignity and worth. It also allows us to engage productively in and contribute to society or our community' (MWBHE/UUK, 2015: 8).

The purpose of this book is to support all university staff, whatever their role, to offer the best care for the mental health and wellbeing of their students. All staff have a part to play in this. The book may also be of interest to students themselves, their friends and families, prospective students and student unions, who wish to know more about the student experience and how universities can support them, so that their experience of university life can be positive. As well as giving the background that will help readers to understand mental health in the context of HE, the book will also address the concerns of academics and professional services in terms of how to respond to wellbeing needs.

The book offers a collection of chapters written by contributors who are specialists in their field and who share their expertise and lived experience with readers. While offering a professional perspective, they have written for a broad audience with varying levels of knowledge and experience of engaging with mental health issues. They have written their chapters with the aim of sharing practical suggestions and solutions to challenging issues.

Please note that the case scenarios used by the authors to illustrate particular elements of their chapters are fictitious or composite and none relate to individual cases, though the situations and challenges they describe are true to the experiences of the authors. If they seem familiar that is because, sadly, similar struggles with mental health are repeated over and again in different university contexts. It is intended that they feel recognisable so that they can be related to; but at no point do they tell any individual's story.

There are three main sections which combine together the major elements that need to be understood in order to ensure that good practice takes place in supporting the mental wellbeing of students in higher education.

Part I – The Context

This outlines the political and economic context of Higher Education (HE) in the UK today, and examines the legal considerations that need to be thought about by universities.

- Chapter 1, *Higher Education in the Twenty-first Century: Changes and Challenges for Mental Wellbeing*, examines the context of HE in UK universities, outlining the many changes that have occurred since the last century. It also outlines the impact of these changes on the student profile and explores the current undergraduate and postgraduate body.
- Chapter 2, *The Legal Position: Obligations and Limits*, explores the key legal obligations which higer education institutions owe to their students in the context of mental health and wellbeing and the implications for the role of university staff at all levels, from policy writing to individual student care, taking into consideration what students can reasonably expect in terms of mental health care and pastoral support during their student journey. It emphasises how staff need to be aware of their responsibilities and limitations within the boundary of their roles, in order to best support students and at the same time protect the institution and themselves from complaints and legal challenge.

Part II – Mental Health

This section demonstrates what needs to be understood by staff in terms of the development of the mind, the influence of transition on student wellbeing and the impact of moving to and living in a new culture.

- Chapter 3, *Student Mental Health and the Developing Mind*, examines the development of the mind and how this may affect mental health. The contribution of neuroscience as well as biological, psychological and social aspects of mental health are explored, along with their implications for how an understanding and response to student wellbeing is shaped.
- Chapter 4, *The Student Lifecycle: Pressure Points and Transitions*, explores the student experience and how it may impact mental health and wellbeing at different stages of a student's university career, including transition from home to university and, finally, into employment.
- Chapter 5, *Cultural Approaches to Mental Health Among Migrating Students*, addresses student mental health in relation to different cultural approaches which may affect both on how a student communicates any mental health difficulty and how their communication is understood and perceived.

Part III – Policy and Practice

This section concentrates on policy and procedure, exploring a whole-university approach that offers strategic best practice, academic and departmental support, and professional support, both internal and external to the institution. It also explores the challenges of how universities manage mental health risk and crisis, the role of university staff members and staff mental wellbeing.

- Chapter 6, *From Strategy to Policy and Procedure: Making Mental Health Policies Work*, considers a whole-university approach to raise staff and student awareness about student mental health issues. It clarifies the range of concerns that mental health policies and procedures should address.
- Chapter 7, *Academic and Departmental Support*, addresses the crucial role of departmental and academic staff in relation to student mental health and wellbeing, in both their pastoral and their teaching responsibilities.
- Chapter 8, *Professional Support in Higher Education*, explores how professional support for mental health problems may be offered both within the university and externally from partners in the community.
- Chapter 9, *Risk and Crisis: Managing the Challenges*, explores the need to prevent crises, where possible, and to anticipate and manage crises that will inevitably occur, by having measures in place and clear procedures which are understood by all staff.
- Chapter 10, *Supporting Staff: Creating the Conditions for Confident Support*, emphasises the need for university staff to support the mental wellbeing of students and the consequent importance of all staff being supported to do this through training and access to effective consultation.

Finally, the Conclusion brings together the roles played by staff of all levels, and also looks at the wider role that government and society can play, to

ensure that good mental health for students and staff is constantly on a university's agenda.

Student mental wellbeing is the responsibility of all university staff, and examples of collaboration and good practice will be offered. The overall aim of the book is to support the whole university community to study and work in an atmosphere of confidence that mental wellbeing is understood and promoted, and mental ill health is addressed and supported in an active and positive way. The book will provide readers with a supportive tool to help them to consider how best to support the mental health and wellbeing of their students and staff in their higher education institutions.

References

MWBHE/UUK (Mental Wellbeing in Higher Education and Universities UK) (2015) *Student Mental Health and Wellbeing: Good Practice Guide.* www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Documents/2015/student-mental-wellbeing-in-he.pdf (accessed 29 January 2019).